

## Final Report

### EXPANDING NICHE AND FARM AND RANCH DIRECT MARKETING OPPORTUNITIES FOR NEW MEXICO FARMERS AND RANCHERS

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## ABSTRACT

Funds were requested to assist a recently established cooperative in north central New Mexico enter an existing niche market of supplying public school lunch programs with fresh produce in at least three public schools.

The cooperative is comprised primarily of Hispanic farmers farming on less than 10 acres of cropland, growing vegetables under row covers and other season extension devices to provide, for the first time in the region, a year round supply of fresh vegetables. The Santa Fe Public School District committed to work with this cooperative initially in three public schools.

The project has met with overwhelming success, and has exceeded our expectations. Sales for the first year were in excess of \$21,000 and are anticipated to increase as we expand the program in the Santa Fe Public School District.

### **Background and Rationale**

In a "Time to Act", the 1998 report of the National Commission on Small Farms two high priority recommendations were that "USDA should promote and foster local and regional food systems for the benefit of small farms, and rural community citizens...", and "should pursue marketing opportunities for small farms to supply local school lunch programs..."

Until recently, this was not been possible in New Mexico due to state restrictions on local purchasing options, lack of year round production by most small farms in New Mexico, and other similar barriers identified in the February 2000 publication "Innovative Marketing Opportunities for Small Farms: Local Schools as Customers" on pages 20 and 21.

This has recently changed with the recent New Mexico Legislative memorial introduced in January 2001 encouraging local school districts to purchase fruits and vegetables from local small farms, and with the establishment of a cooperative that has the capability to produce on a year round basis.

Additionally, New Mexico has a poverty rate of 25%, qualifying it as the poorest state in the nation (U.S. Bureau of the Census, March 1996). Children living in poverty are especially at risk. Under nutrition along with environmental factors associated with poverty can permanently retard physical growth, brain development, and learning ability. Obesity and poor nutritional habits are a growing problem in New Mexico. The Santa Fe Public Schools(SFPS) mandates health education; however, because of the many areas in health education, competing demands have resulted in a lack of nutrition education for elementary school children.

Santa Fe Public Schools has a district total of 45% of the students who are qualified for free or reduced-price school meals (F/R). In the elementary schools this figure rises to an average of 52.8%. Twelve of the twenty elementary schools have 50% or more students who are qualified for the free or reduced price lunch program.

Since 1993, the Student Nutrition Advisory Council (SNAC), a group of nutrition professionals, school nurses, school administrators, and chefs has been working to improve student nutrition in the Santa Fe Public Schools. One program that has grown out of these efforts is *Cooking with Kids*, a multi cultural food education program that works to improve children's nutrition by involving public school students in hands-on learning about culturally diverse foods that are healthy and appealing. For the past six years, *Cooking with Kids* has purchased locally grown foods for classroom use, but has found numerous barriers to procurement for school meals.

A 2000 NMDA survey included asking farmers if they were interested in selling to schools. The resulting list was given to School Food service Directors through the State Department of Education. In addition, the 2001 New Mexico Legislature approved a Joint Memorial (34) which encourages schools to use more locally grown agricultural products in school meals. The importance of providing schools with New Mexico grown agricultural products is in encouraging children to eat more fresh fruits and vegetables and to provide a year-round marketing opportunity for New Mexico farmers

## **OBJECTIVES**

Specifically, the objectives of this proposal were to:

1. incorporate locally grown fresh fruits and vegetables into school meals.
2. expand marketing opportunities for New Mexico farmers.
3. increase direct sales and farm and ranch income.

## **Methods**

The project incorporated locally grown fresh fruits and vegetables into school meals. A coordinator for the program was hired July 1, 2001. Implementation of the program began August 2001 at the following sites for 2001-2002.

Cesar Chavez Elementary School - 532 students - 80% F/R

Alvord Elementary School - 150 students - 69% F/R

Capitol High School - 1368 students - 47% F/R

These sites were chosen by the SFPS Food service Director, with support from school site personnel and SNAC. A classroom nutrition education component was included in the two elementary schools, based on *Cooking with Kids*' experiential methods. Capitol High School will undergo renovation during summer 2001, which included a salad bar serving line.

The pilot included a “Local Harvest” Salad Bar in each school, which included New Mexico grown salad greens. In addition, the program incorporated more New Mexico agricultural products in school meals, and when possible and product was available was incorporated into school lunch menus in all Santa Fe public schools.

In order to accomplish this goal, linkages needed to be established between local farmers and the schools. For at least ten years, farmers, chefs, nutritionists, and local entrepreneurs have talked about how to forge these links in a sustainable manner. Farmers in the Santa Fe Family Farmers’ Coop were interested and able to sell salad greens to the schools for most of the school year.

## Results

The Farms to Schools pilot project was implemented in three of the Santa Fe Public Schools this year (2001-2002). Each school had a different “set-up” to promote fresh, local fruits and vegetables.

## Expenditures

Total sales were over \$21,000 in the first year, and have continued to increase each year since the pilot. A variety of fruits and vegetables such as watermelons, apples and pumpkins were purchased from local producers for *all* schools in the district. For the three pilot schools, we also purchased salad mix and as much local produce as possible within the season. Most of the purchases of fresh local produce occurred in the months of September and October, due to the short growing season in Northern New Mexico.

We were able to purchase the salad mix through the beginning of December, and are still purchasing fresh sunflower sprouts. We also purchased necessary equipment in order for the staff to work efficiently and cost-effectively. The equipment we have purchased are salad spinners to make the salad mix look light and fluffy, and wedgers for coring and slicing fruits and vegetables quickly.

The final set of purchases was for nutrition education classes. We were able to purchase a food guide pyramid model with a variety of food models, a felt food guide pyramid, several different books about food, educational posters and games.

To date, all local produce has been purchased through the district, while equipment and nutrition education materials have been purchased with the NMDA grant money.

## Nutrition Education Classes

There were two sets of nutrition education classes for all the students of Alvord Elementary. The first sets of classes were conducted in late September and early October. These classes covered salad bar etiquette, germs, the five food groups and portion sizes. It was very evident the impact these classes had on the students based on changed behaviors observed when they were in line. Students are more careful with

utensils, they count the number of food groups on their trays, and they are careful about food spilling on the salad bar.

The second sets of classes were conducted in the month of February and were just recently been completed. These classes covered the food guide pyramid and how different foods benefit the body. Students enjoyed the food guide pyramid model as well as the games we were able to play.

The Cooking with Kids educators were informed of the classes that would be conducted and were able to reinforce the information the students had or would be receiving. The Cooking with Kids program was a great partner for collaboration of nutrition education and cooking skills. We are looking for ways to align our programs more closely in the future.

## **Observations**

There is a lot of information that can be gained through observation. There are certain food items that staff from all the pilot schools has noticed the students liking or not liking. The most accepted local product by the students is the sunflower sprouts. The least accepted local product seems to be radishes. Other favorites of the students at Alvord are broccoli, carrots, cucumbers and yogurt with fruit. Favorites of the students at Capital High are broccoli, cucumbers, eggs and other protein items put out on the salad bar. The students at Capital High are also more receptive to the salad mix if it has romaine and/or iceberg lettuce mixed with it.

Other observations seen at Alvord are that students do not like to eat tuna alone, but they do enjoy it in Pita bread. Students are very good at making suggestions to add foods they like to the salad bar and remove foods they don't like. Students are willing to try new items if they have some encouragement from the staff.

What we have learned so far

There are many important lessons we have learned so far this year that will benefit the program next year.

1. We now know that even in a small school, there needs to be at least 2 kitchen staff on duty each day in order to finish preparation effectively.
2. It is difficult to cover the cost of food *and* labor in a small school because the reimbursement is minimal, though we are trying to find ways to accomplish it.
3. Purchasing of apples should occur at the beginning of the school year. When purchasing in bulk, the apples must be picked at peak ripeness or they will not hold as well in storage through November and December.

4. Salad mix will not be available after the first part of December through early January in most cases.
5. Proper salad bar equipment, including pans, utensils and preparation equipment improves salad bar presentation and appeal.
6. The nutrition class covering salad bar etiquette is vital in order for students to make sure they have a reimbursable meal and are cautious about sanitation issues.
7. Adults need to be trained from the start of school on portion sizes and meal options so there is no confusion about how much they may take.
8. The availability of local produce is mostly from August to early October and then again in late April and May. During the other months, produce comes from the produce vendor.
9. Major promotion to administration and other district staff should take place at the beginning of the year in order to get an increase of adult meals. Perhaps looking at some type of delivery could be an option in the future.
10. We need to increase calories on the line at Alvord to ensure requirements are being met. The nutritional analysis of the line will begin soon.
11. It is very important that the students are encouraged to take fruits and vegetables from the salad bar as well as try new food items that they have never tried before. The students at Alvord have been pretty good about trying new foods so far, but it takes some coaxing. This requires a certain type of kitchen staff.

## **Recent Changes**

In the end of January, a new Manager started at Alvord after some staffing difficulties. She has been getting trained over the last month on procedures and is doing a great job. In analyzing the staff and their time schedules at Alvord, we decided it is possible to bake fresh bread for the students. Initially it was thought to be too time consuming with such a small staff, but with good time management it is possible. The fresh baked goods have been very well received by both students and staff. The staff at Alvord is frequently praising the food selection and quality that has occurred under the new manager.

## **Overall Evaluation**

Overall, the Farms to Schools program is doing very well. There has been good support from the students, staff and parents throughout the year. There have been no complaints about getting tired of the salad bar from the students and it is obvious they enjoy choosing the foods they want each day.

Our biggest hurdle to overcome is how to make it more cost-effective. It is possible that expansion into other larger schools could help with costs since there are more students, hence increased reimbursement. These are issues that will be assessed closely at the end of the school year.

Another hurdle we hope to overcome with the help of the farmers is the extension of produce availability in Northern New Mexico. There are several farmers looking into greenhouses in order to extend their growing seasons. We are currently very limited on the produce we are able to purchase from mid October through mid April. In order to get the full impact of what this program is about, it would be desirable to have produce available year round or as close to that as possible.

Of course procurement is another issue we hope to simplify in the future. Legislation occurring now may make future purchasing much easier. We have, however, defined a bid process to use next year to meet the procurement code.

Collaboration and coordination with the Cooking with Kids program will continue. Both programs are working toward the same goal, so perhaps there is a way to combine curriculum in the future offering a wide array of benefits to the students.

This is a great program that is taking a stand on child nutrition and education issues. The only way to promote a healthy society and avoid increasing obesity and its associated diseases is to educate our children. This program is doing that and has the potential to do it throughout their school career allowing them to enter adulthood with knowledge that will be applied throughout their lifetime.